

Birds and Smokestacks by amutemockingjay

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Summary:

There were birds here, not like in Birkenau.

aka the historian Jew writes a Holocaust AU because she saw a fic in this archive that was a Holocaust Mileven AU that had Mike as a Nazi and I didn't get a degree in History not to write a response fic out of pettiness. I am that bitch.

Edit: I somehow ended up writing this into an entire AU though the last thing I need is another WIP but here we are.

1. Birds

Author's Note:

Hey okay so

A few months back I saw a Holocaust AU in this archive. Since I got my degree in History with a focus on Holocaust Studies, and used to work at a Holocaust museum, I read it. Which was rather unfortunate, because it was a camp guard/prisoner romance and the author had cast Mike as the camp guard. I politely explained that, as a Jewish person, I found it offensive that Mike, who is played by a Jewish actor, was cast in the role of a Nazi (the fic was also super historically inaccurate and I can live without the Nazi/victim romance in my life. It's not necessary. Stop writing it). The author got super angry, deleted my comments, and doubled down, basically. The author was also not Jewish, and when I pointed out the issue with Finn's character as a Nazi, said that they didn't see what being Jewish had to do with anything.

I thought to myself, well, writing about the Holocaust isn't wrong, in and of itself. But what would happen if I wrote a Holocaust AU that was respectful of Finn's Jewish background, with my years of studying?

So this happened. This solely exists to prove that it's possible to write about the Holocaust respectfully, and accurately. If you're interested in learning more about what I'm writing about, please let me know! I have plenty of resources for y'all.

Also, I live for Mileven so hit me up on Tumblr if you want to talk, @piecesofkessa

Birds. She looks up at the grey, endless, sky and she sees birds. There were no birds in Birkenau. But here, out on this desolate heath, there is life. Greenery. And a poisonous wind that shakes through her lungs and robs her of any ability to speak.

Words don't have meaning for what she feels--the pangs of ferocious hunger, the cold, it's so terribly cold, that wrack across her body. The degrees of humiliation, of degradation, that brings her here. Sunk to her knees in icy mud. She's lost her shoes long ago, shoes that she saved up and "bought" in Birkenau. Everything can be bartered for a price.

She reaches for the hand of the only other person she has left, hands calloused and broken by the senseless work of Birkenau. They had been the dregs, the lowest of the low. Her brown eyes meet with blue-grey, and they stop at the entrance of a white tent, two girls lost in a sea of other women. No one to look out for them but each other. She doesn't speak, and the other pulls her inside to her a corner.

Sleeping on dirt, in filth unspeakable, a storm rages around them, wind howling, hail and rain pounding the canvas. The tent collapses under strain, and amidst the chaos, they escape. Running to a barrack at the far end of their camp, the Sternlager, the Star Camp. Divided in half between them, in their striped rags, and those who wear the star of David on their clothes, ready to be exchanged for German prisoners of war. People headed to Palestine, it's said. She can't even imagine what it would be like there, in Palestine, in the heat, so far away from this endless war.

In Birkenau, people disappear. They are "Selected" they fade into a haze of smoke, the ashes that smudge her cheek.

Here, they die. She trips over skeletons in the dark, on her way to Appell. Bodies thrown into pits, where the birds circle overhead.

In Birkenau, sickness was hidden, sent away to the hospital block, a death sentence.

Here, sickness, the typhus fever, is in every breath, in the lice that infest her rags, in the flush of Max's hollow face.

Sickness makes her head spin, her knees buckle. They huddle in their bunk near the door, that bitter wind, an old enemy, sneaks through. Voices clamor for the door to be closed, weak everyday. She moves with slowness, with apathy, and yet--

She waits for him. She hasn't seen Mike since the platform at Auschwitz, before the gates of Birkenau. Her tortured screams as they ripped her out of his arms, men in those stripes telling her to walk, to be healthy, to stop crying, damn it.

She wasn't crying. She doesn't cry.

But she can never forget the look in his eyes as they are marched away from each other, the determination, the promise. She will find him again.

Sometimes, she thinks its the only thing that keeps her alive.

Dragging herself to Appell, a horse blanket wrapped between her and Max, the two girls huddling together as the fever burns so high and so cold. The crisp boots of the camp guard, a flash of leather gloves, the guttural screams in a language she wishes she didn't understand. Jewish whore. Bitch. Fucking cunt.

She watches as the life slips out of Max, give out and collapse. Uses the last of her strength to pull her back into the barracks. Sitting next to her, murmuring lullabies. She doesn't know how to pray, not here. Max has always prayed, mumbling in the morning. Not her. She looks up, at the crack of sky she can see between panels of rough wood, and prays for it to end. She sees the birds, swooping through the endless winter. And it drifts into nothingness.

Then, white.

When she opens her eyes again, a man stands over her, a uniform she doesn't recognize. Max is still next to her, curled inwards, huddled against cold. A doctor puts Max on a stretcher and she is screaming, no doctors, where they take you, you don't come back.

The man searches for a language she can understand. Finally, he shows her the British flag outside, the British trucks. Free. They are free.

She stumbles, barely able to move, and blinks. They are free. They are free, and the commandant is being hauled into a truck, kicked in the ass by the British. She wants to sink her fists into him, kick in his

teeth. But her body betrays her spirit and she sinks back to the ground.

Days later, as she gets stronger under nurses' care, she sees SS women being forced to dig mass graves, to touch the dead prisoners. She sees their lips curled in disgust, the bile swallowed back. She can never be human to them, and though the vengeance is sweet, she will never forgive them for what she has lost.

Color comes back into Max's cheeks, light back into her eyes. As they recover, they get the news they will be headed back to the border. A truck. A train. Then--her river. The canals she knew. The houses. At least, maybe, a place to go back to. So many can't. She's heard stories of non-Jews stealing Jewish homes, murdering the Jews who return, and she is afraid.

In every passerby, she looks for Mike. At every opportunity she wanders the city, checks the Red Cross lists, speak to people who hid Jews, who hid them. Surely, he will come back. Hop finds her in a train station, hysterical. Takes her home. She knows he wishes he could protect her from the nightmares. But he gets them too, chases the number on his arm with a drink. Or two. Or five.

She is on edge, waiting for the doorbell to ring. Waiting for a sign, for an answer.

And then--a knock.

Hop answers, and calls her.

Her heart can't take it. Mike stands on the stoop, a flower in his hand. He is gaunt, he is thin, he is haunted. But he is hers.

"I waited for you," he whispers into her curls, his hand on her lower back. He holds her close, never wants to let go.

Then, in her arms, she cries. For everything she lost, everything she saw, what she can't get out of her head, what has been damaged by heat and ash and cold. He cries with her, tears dripping into her hair and down her neck.

"I'm not leaving your side," he says. "No matter what happens. Never

again.” He presses a kiss, a fast one, to her temple.

She brings him into the warmth. They will start again. They will rebuild their lives. But no matter what she does, she can never get the scorch off her skin.

2. Bells

Summary for the Chapter:

She is a lucky girl.

Notes for the Chapter:

So this wasn't supposed to turn into an entire AU but here we are, and here am I, procrastinating on my actual creative writing class I'm taking.

Thank you guys so much for the feedback, it meant so much to me, truly. I'm gonna add little historical facts to the end notes of each chapter.

To those who celebrate, L'Shanah Tovah!!! May your 5779 be better than 5778 (my 5778 was less than ideal haha).

Mike keeps his promise. Hop rents a small place in a different part of the city, far from the south, where they were before they had to go into hiding. And every morning, the doorbell rings.

In the beginning, she can't race for it. She's still too physically weak, gets exhausted in small bouts. She has to wait for Hop to make his way to the door, arms crossed over his chest. His indignation never quite reaches his eyes. He can't deny the seventeen year old he calls his daughter, not after what has happened to her. What had happened to the both of them.

After the way he watched over Mike and the others in Auschwitz, they both know the routine is a charade.

But, somehow, it brings a bit of normalcy. That he was just a regular father, being protective of his regular daughter as she went through her first courtship.

Not someone who spent months, years, pretending to be someone else, moving from safe house to safe house with a new name for each, hoping that nobody would recognize him for who he was. Hoping, never praying. He wasn't the type. Before the hiding, when the

round-ups started, wondering if he was going to be grabbed off the street, and never make it home.

Or even worse, that she would be.

So he answers the door and the kid is there, looking so earnest, usually with some kind of present for her. A flower, maybe, or a bit of bread (the hunger winter of '45 still had its effects in the country). This time, though, he has an entire loaf that he presents to Hop.

"She'll be down in a minute," Hop says to the kid, who shifts his weight from foot to foot, and won't quite meet Hop's eyes.

"Actually, uh, sir, I was hoping I could talk to you."

Hop raises his eyebrows. His urge to take the piss out of the kid hasn't fully bounced back, post liberation. Not yet. But it will.

There's the sound of feet clattering down a narrow stairway, and El appears at the door, clinging to the frame. "Mike!"

The way the kid's entire face lights up when he sees her is kind of adorable, not that Hop would ever say as much.

"El."

"Want to take a walk?" The summer had bloomed beautifully here, and after so much hiding, and then the desolation in Poland and Germany, she had become obsessed with spending as much time as she could outdoors. And once they were out of Hop's watchful gaze, she was free to kiss him as much as she wanted to.

"In a minute," Mike tells her. "I have to talk to..." He hesitates, uncertain still of how to address Hop.

"Me," Hop finishes the sentence for him. "He wants to talk to me."

"Oh. All right." She seems a little deflated, but disappears down the corridor.

Hop and Mike sit at a rough wooden table next to the small kitchen, Mike shifting and fidgeting. Hop has a feeling of what's coming, but

he's still enjoys, a small bit, watching the kid struggle through this. Mike pushes the bread toward Hop.

"I was hoping, uh, sir, I could ask you, um, something."

"Bribe me," Hop said pointedly, looking at the loaf.

"I mean, yes, uh, no, she's not, the bread is--"

"I know, kid, don't have an aneurysm. It's appreciated."

"I, um, uh...."

"Yes?" Hop puts his elbows on the table, leaning in a little bit.

"I'd like to ask, uh, sir for your, um, permission to...."

"Permission to what?" Hop asks innocently.

This earns him a brief glare. Then Hop sees the kid attempt to compose himself, wipe his palms on his pants. Take a breath.

"Permission to marry your daughter." He slumps against the back of the chair, all the agitation pulled out of him with the words.

Hop takes pause. Really, more to make the kid sweat than anything else. Truth is, he has a sense that this is what El wants--she thinks she's subtle, but she's not. And he'd do anything to make his daughter happy. But god, it's just too much fun to watch Mike squirm under his faux-stern gaze.

"I suppose...." Hop draws out the words, in their native tongue, making them linger. Why he had switched to this old language, instead of what they speak every day, he isn't sure. Maybe for dramatic effect, because he's the type. "I suppose I could allow that."

"Really?!" Mike practically upturns his chair, and quickly corrects himself. "I mean, thank you." God, the smile the kid wears could power the entire block.

"Yes, really. Make her happy."

“Oh, I will. I promise.”

“Good. Because if you hurt her in any way, I will end you.” Not the first time he’s said that threat to the kid, but it never hurt to emphasize. El had been through so much already. She wasn’t the same. None of them were.

“Understood.” Mike pauses. “I don’t have....I can’t afford a ring. Do you think she’ll be okay with that?”

Hop manages a small smile. “Kid, she’d say yes to you even if you gave her half a cabbage. Trust me.” He leans towards the door. “She’s waiting for you.”

With that dismissal, Mike runs out the door. Hop sighs heavily. They were all still struggling to get back up on their feet, and they would have very little. Nothing like his marriage, long before the war. Back in the old country. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He was too old for this. And yet....

They were overdue for a sliver of happiness.

She is waiting for him, and as soon as they are out the door and a respectful distance away, he kisses her. Every time he kisses her, she feels it all the way down to her toes, a jolt that goes through her spine to the tips of her fingers, makes her breath heavy. And every time, her mind flashes to their first kiss, three years before, not too far from the Jewish Lyceum. Far enough away that she buzzed with the thrill of not being caught. After all, good Jewish girls weren’t supposed to let boys kiss them. In those days, in 1942, she didn’t want to draw any attention to the yellow star on their coats.

Now, though, he’s kissing her senseless, kissing her deeply, the longing for more in the way his hands wrap around her waist.

“Mike,” she breathes, between kisses.

“Yes?”

“We should--” She looks at him, in his plain blue shirt, certain she’s

never seen someone so handsome. “Stop.” She doesn’t want to stop, but if she doesn’t, she will push him up against one of the many brick walls and be far from a good Jewish girl. That had to wait, but both we were getting impatient.

“Fine.” He pulled away, and squeezed her hand. “To be continued, at some other point.”

They had made it a few blocks along the canal, the water lapping softly.

“What were you talking to Hop about?”

Mike suddenly looked nervous, and scratched the back of his neck. “Just...” He sighed. “You know, I can’t do it.”

She furrowed her brows together. “Can’t do what?”

“Lie to you,” he says. He turns to face her, and anxiety creeps up the back of her neck.

He looks nervous, running his hand through his hair, his fingers shaking. He meets her eyes, then looks away, then goes back to contact, indecisive.

“I’m not good at this,” he admits. “There’s...so much I want to say. So much I don’t know how to say. But...” He squeezes her hand. “I waited for you. When they took you away from me, I swore that I would find you again. And I did. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I don’t want to waste a single moment, and I swear, I will never let anyone separate us again.” There is an intense look in his eyes, and her heart began to beat faster.

“I don’t want to be apart from you,” she says.

“I know. That’s why....I hope you’ll do me the honor of being my wife.”

She lets out a little gasp, and he continues.

“Eleanor Jane Hopper, will you marry me?”

She wraps her arms around him. "Yes." Burying her nose in his shoulder--he's so tall and she's so small--she takes in his scent, the warmth, the comfort of being in his arms. "Always," she murmurs, his hand on her lower back.

Sometimes, she wasn't certain she'd live to this moment, to what she dreamed of when it felt like everything she had ever known had been replaced by an upside down existence, where nothing made sense.

In that moment, she understood why the glass was smashed at the end of a wedding. Some said it was to mourn the destruction of the Temple, a reminder that there is always a bit of sadness to even the happiest of occasions.

To her, it was the reminder that her existence is a radical act. Birkenau was not designed for survival, and she's still convinced the only thing that got her out of hell was luck. Being in the right place at the right time. A series of events going right, and some going wrong. If they hadn't been caught, if they hadn't been sent to Westerbork, then Birkenau, then Belsen....

And there were so many that had been not as lucky. Their deaths lay in the hands of the Germans, the bloods that still cry from the ground.

She is a lucky girl.

Notes for the Chapter:

Historical note #1: The "hunger winter" refers to the winter of 1944-45, where many people living in the Netherlands died of starvation due to lack of food. Germany was exporting all of their crops back to Germany, because Reich economic policy was bullshit and unsustainable (in other news water is wet).

Historical note #2: I've spent a lot of time with Shoah survivors in my former profession, which was always a blessing. Recently, though, I met a survivor who was in Auschwitz-Birkenau when she was ten years old--she was one of the children who was

under Mengele's "care" if you can imagine how horrifying that was. Over and over again, when telling her story, she kept saying, "I was lucky." She grew up in an Orthodox home, but no longer believes in God. But that stuck with me--that she attributed it to luck, and I don't think she's wrong. Popular culture likes to portray the survivors as somehow stronger than the victims, but that never sat well with me.

3. Bikes

Summary for the Chapter:

They met at the Jewish Lyceum.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi y'all sorry this took me a while but I'm taking a creative writing course that I have to haul ass for, changed jobs, and moved! But here we are, and I decided I am going to alternate between doing a flashback to their past, and moving forward with the wedding storyline, so there will be more of that in the next chapter.

1942

She doesn't talk much. She's been in the Netherlands for four years, and she's still uncertain about her ability to speak Dutch. Better to stay silent. Mostly. There's only one person she'll really talk to, outside of her foster father, Jim Hopper. With him, she always spoke German anyway.

Max Mayfield is a different story. She had been her seatmate long before they had both been forced to switch schools to the Jewish Lyceum last year. Max had been her first--and only friend--since she started school in Amsterdam, at the Montessori school. Her redhead friend is natively Dutch, and generally didn't take shit from the other kids, which helps immensely.

And today, in maths, they are whispering behind their notebooks, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the teacher. Not the first time--both were often assigned extra homework as a punishment for talking--and certainly wouldn't be the last.

This time, though, the teacher didn't seem to be in the mood assign another essay. Instead, he slams his ruler down on the front of the desk.

“Maxine Mayfield! Change places with Michael Wheeler.”

Max looks up, her eyes icy. She opens her mouth to argue, thinks better of it, and gathers up her schoolbooks, heading to the back of the classroom.

In her place, a tall boy sits, his dark hair hanging in his eyes. She doesn't know him well, only that his friends call him Mike, that he spends time with Dustin Henderson and Will Byers. Dustin has made her laugh in class before, but she hasn't put much thought into Mike or the rest of them, other than the occasional smile.

As she forces herself to try and pay attention to the Geometry lesson, she notices that he is gazing at her. Somehow, this makes her blush, and she buries herself back into her textbook. Problem is, maths has never been her forte, and when the teacher gives them proofs to work on, she is hopelessly stuck, chewing on the end of her pencil.

“Need help?” Mike's proofs are all completed, of course.

She nods. He patiently spends time explaining the problem to her, in a way that doesn't make her feel stupid. She had been the brightest pupil in her classroom back in Vienna, before they had forbidden Jews to go to school, and her Tante Rebecca ruled it was safer for her to go on the Kindertransport to Holland.

When they both reach for the eraser at the same time, fingertips brushing, there is heat there, and she looks away.

The end of day bell pulls her out of it, and she gathers up her notebooks.

“Thank you,” she says, hoping her accent isn't quite so obvious.

“You're welcome. Would you, um,” he hesitates, shuffling his feet a bit. “Like to get some hot chocolate? It's kind of, uh, chilly today, and I thought--”

“I'm sorry, I have to walk home. My....father gets worried if I don't come straight home.” It is strange to call Hopper her father, but she didn't have any other.

“You walk home?”

“Yes.” She bites her lip, uncomfortable with talking this much. “I live on Merwederplein.”

“That’s a long walk. Why don’t you ride a bike?”

“Got stolen.”

“You can ride with me,” he offers. “I live a couple of blocks away, so I know how long it can take to walk there, now that we’re not allowed to take the tram.”

She considers this. It is a long walk, and she sees Max is already gone.

“All right.”

She has never been so close to be a boy before. Riding through the streets, her arms around Mike--for safety--he said, the chilly breeze does nothing to sap the heat from her cheeks. He is talkative, at least with her. She, more hesitant, until she realizes he won’t tease her for her accented Dutch.

She learns that he lives not far from her, in Amsterdam-South, and has two sisters, one older, one younger. He is curious about her, but information comes in short bursts. She doesn’t discuss what she left behind in Vienna. Not even Max or Hopper know about what happened in Vienna.

He stops in front of the building she lives in, and she tries her best to get off the bike elegantly. It is not an entirely successful endeavor. He hesitates, looking at her from under his dark hair that is in definite need of a trim. She tears away her gaze, focusing on her shoes.

“If you’d like, we can ride to and from school together, since your bike got stolen.”

She nods. “Please.”

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow, at 7.30?”

“Thank you.”

They both stand, her hand on the door knob, unwilling to break the tentative connection, but unsure of how to go forward. There is the sound of a window opening above them, on the third floor. Max leans out the window, red hair swinging.

“Just kiss her already, Wheeler!”

El sighs in exasperation, and Mike turns bright red.

“I better go,” he mumbles.

She feels a pang of disappointment. “Tomorrow?”

He smiles. “Tomorrow.”

He hops back on his bike, and she heads into the apartment building, more than ready to give Max hell and a half for that “suggestion” of hers. Instead, as soon as El opens her mouth to start, Max just laughs.

“Have you seen the way he looks at you? He’s in love with you,” Max declares.

El tries unsuccessfully to hide her blush, her heart picking up the pace. If only. She is sure he just wants to be her friend. Nothing more.

Riding to and from school with Mike opens her up to his friends, and his to hers. He is uncertain around Max at first, stubborn and unforgiving for her yelling from the window. But slowly, they begin to fit in.

El gets to know Dustin, with his mop of curly hair and infectious smile that always makes things a little brighter, no matter how frightening the day. Will, who’s pencil flies across papers, drawing in the margins of their school assignments. He is quiet, and El is drawn

to him immediately. His older brother, Jonathan, is a few years ahead of them, in class with Mike's sister Nancy. Lucas doesn't attend the Jewish Lyceum, but lies low anyway--he and his mother had fled Germany in 1933, only to be caught in the same net as the rest of them. Nazis did not look kindly upon his background, either.

Hopper is glad that she is socializing, making friends, but still doesn't allow her out to anyone's place other than Max's. As a result, the Hopper household becomes a gathering place for the whole group, who begin to refer to themselves as the Party. Unable to work as a policeman anymore, Hopper offers legal advice to the Jewish community with a lawyer, a small business that keeps them in bread, for now. They are a team, him and El, the unspoken tragedies between them simmering beneath the surface. He teaches her to cook, though, he is not good at it himself, and she gets used to eating a lot of burnt food.

As she picks at her burnt chicken one night, Hop clears his throat.

"I know the Wheeler kid has been giving you rides to school."

El puts her fork down. She waits for him to continue.

"I just want you to be careful. Not to draw attention to yourself."

She frowns. "We're not." She doesn't like the way he is phrasing this, as though it is somehow her fault.

Hop looks down at his food. He pauses, clears his throat. El isn't sure she's ever seen her foster father look so uncomfortable. "He hasn't..." He stabs his chicken a little too aggressively. "You haven't been....necking in public, have you?"

She stands up, pushing back her chair with anger. "We're not necking!" She finds herself blushing as she says this, and tries to push against the intrusive thought that appears in her mind, of her and Mike, of how she might like the feeling of his lips on hers.

Hop chuckles softly at her outrage, which only serves to make her more indignant. "He seems very fond of you."

El curls her hands into fists at her sides. First Max, now Hopper, she'd

even gotten some teasing from the other members of the Party too. Were they all seeing something she couldn't? The thought made her even angrier, and she stormed out of the room, slamming the door to her bedroom to make it clear precisely how she felt about that line of questioning.

Drawing her knees up to her chest, she finally allows the thoughts in: what if Mike felt for her what she felt for him?

When she sleeps, she has nightmares. They always start with shattered glass. There was nothing poetic about the smashed windows in Vienna, the smell of smoke, the sweat and fear that came as an instinct. She had never known the terror of pogrom in that moment, the true meaning of that word, but the pain and anxiety she felt seemed centuries old.

She runs through the Viennese streets in her dream-world, the sky that same shade of blood red that she remembered from that day. This time, though, she is searching for him.

She turns corner after corner and he isn't there. The panic rises in her chest; she can barely breathe. Behind her, she can hear the stomp of boots, of the song she heard over and over again after Hitler annexed Austria.

"When Jewish blood spurts from the knife...."

The cobblestones grow to have sharp edges; when she trips, her palms catching her falling, they are sliced open, the thick scent of her own blood spilling into the streets.

And then she sees him, struggling to break free of two Nazis, Brownshirts. One of them holds a gun to his head.

"Mike!" She screams, the tears pouring down her face.

The Brownshirt fires his gun, and as the shot echoes, she sinks to her knees, overcome. Powerless, she is powerless, and he's in danger, he's hurt, he's going to die....

Just as quickly, the scene changes. It's a void of some sort, all darkness except a bed, where Mike sleeps. El walks towards him, where the dark ground is covered in slimy puddles. He is sleeping peacefully, breathing in and out. No gunshot wound, no Nazis. Alive.

She reaches out to touch him, and everything crumbles to dust.

When she wakes, she can barely catch her breath, sweat sticking her hair to her forehead. She doesn't call out for Hopper, doesn't say a word. But she can't shake the feeling that something terrible is about to happen.

Notes for the Chapter:

Historical fact: After the First World War, French soldiers, including French soldiers of color, occupied parts of Germany as part of the Treaty of Versailles. When some of these men married German women, their children became known as the "Rhineland bastards" and due to Nazi racist ideology, these people of color were persecuted under the Third Reich. Very little research has been done on their story, and I'll admit to not being an expert, but that is where the references to Lucas' background come from.

Author's Note:

Historical fact: The commandant of Bergen-Belsen, Jozef Kramer, was executed for crimes against humanity. The British forces who liberated the camp did in fact make the female SS guards and citizens of the town next to the camp bury the dead. The camp was so infected with typhus that the British had to burn it to keep the disease from spreading. Also, if the mood strikes me, I might continue in this universe. I like to imagine that Mike and El got married and had a beautiful Jewish family.